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The Linguist

Crime stoppers

How linguists can work more effectively with police to fight transnational organised crime

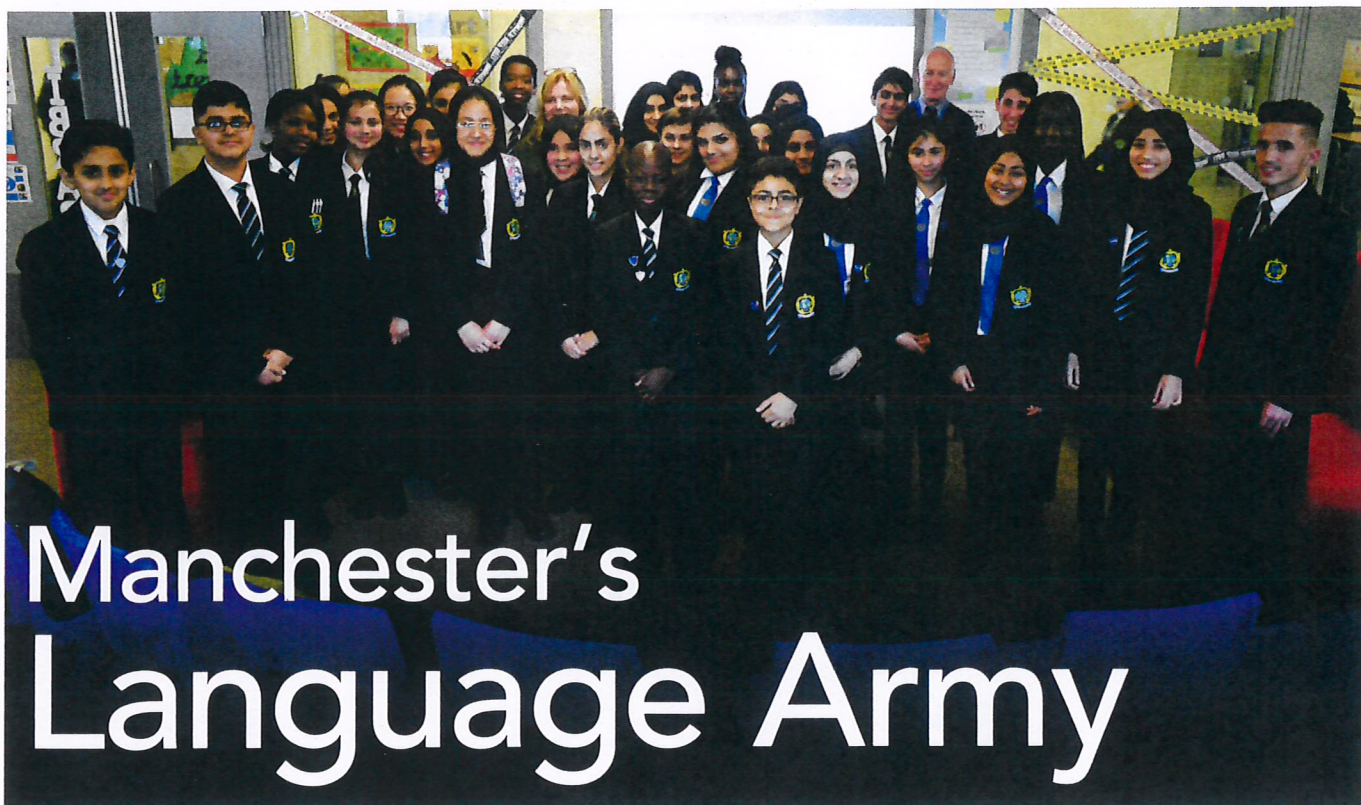
Talents show

Why using the skills of bilingual pupils raises engagement and attainment across the whole school

Moral conflict

What obligations do military organisations have to the interpreters they work with?





Manchester's Language Army

How one school is reaping the benefits of using pupils' language skills to help new arrivals. By Karl McLaughlin

Set in the culturally diverse Crumpsall/Cheetham Hill area of Manchester, Abraham Moss Community School is one of very few schools in northwest England to operate a formal programme that identifies bilingual pupils and offers them basic training in the skills required to act as language mediators within the school environment. More than 60 languages are spoken at Abraham Moss, which began the programme five years ago with a group of just eight pupils in Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16). Since then it has blossomed into an impressive 'language army' – nearly 40-strong – of 'young interpreters' aged 12-16, who cover languages as diverse as Arabic, Chinese, Hungarian, Italian, Pashtun, Polish, Spanish, Turkish and Urdu.

Given the Abraham Moss motto, *Ex Diversitate Vires* ('From Diversity comes Strength'), its concerted efforts to foster multilingualism and multiculturalism come as no surprise, although the fruits of this latest initiative cannot fail to impress. The school, which has just over 1,700 pupils, receives approximately 80 mid-year admissions of young people from outside the UK every year, including economic migrants, asylum seekers and children of overseas students; children

To help the newcomers adapt to their new school setting, the young interpreters act as official mentors

who are fully literate and high achievers in their first language but with widely varying levels of English language, and others who have had no exposure to English at all.

To help the newcomers adapt to their new school setting, the young interpreters act as official mentors, passing on crucial peer knowledge of how things work at Abraham Moss. Other valuable contributions include providing support with the admissions process, peer support in lessons, tutor time and lunchtime, and 'reading buddies'. A further function is to help out at parents' meetings and open days, where pupils use their language skills to relay key information to families in real time. The young interpreters

also go out and help with admissions meetings and First Language Assessments in local primary schools.

The programme earned Abraham Moss a prestigious accolade in 2016 when it beat stiff competition from across the country to lift the TES International Award. The annual distinction is conferred on the school "with the most innovative international strategy, including initiatives to improve pupils' and teachers' understanding of other countries, languages and cultures", with an emphasis on strategies with demonstrable impact across the school and the wider community.

Building confidence

The junior linguists' work is vital for helping new arrivals to build confidence when entering the unfamiliar and often daunting environment of a new school. "In many cases, without them, the newcomers and their families would be unable to communicate or receive important news and information, so there is no doubt that our young interpreters help them embed properly at school," explains Programme leader and Assistant Head of EAL (English as an additional language) Sharon Collins.

The advantages are far from one-way. Indeed, participation in the programme brings untold benefits for the student mediators themselves. As Collins explains: "Our young interpreters often speak heritage languages that could be in danger of being stifled as pupils seek to fit in and not appear different. Showing them that these first languages have an important role gives them a real boost and encourages them to use them. Knowing they are doing a valuable job for their school and the community also boosts their self-confidence and motivates them to study even harder." The contributions of the young interpreters are regularly acknowledged in school assemblies and their faces appear on posters around the corridors. They even wear special badges on their uniform lapels to make them easily identifiable.

Rafiullah, a Year 10 pupil originally from Afghanistan, has experienced both sides of the fence. "When I arrived in the UK, I felt sad because I was new and I couldn't speak English. Some of the young interpreters helped me to settle in and make friends, and now I have become a member of the team and I have helped lots of other new arrivals," he says. For Year 11 pupil Daniel, who comes from the Czech Republic, the young interpreters are "ambassadors for our school" and "proud to have such a responsible role".

University support

Spanish is an important language among the young interpreters group, which has included a number of pupils who were raised in Spain before moving to Britain. Embedded from an early age, their Spanish skills were strong enough to allow them to take part in final-year interpreting classes at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). The university provides assistance to the programme in the form of periodic visits by academic staff to deliver talks on the interpreting profession, along with tips on how to approach the work.

According to Collins, the link with MMU, which began in 2016, has added "another layer" to the programme, with pupils learning a great deal and being inspired by the

experiences of professional interpreters and interpreting undergraduates. Among those to benefit is Year 11 pupil Noor. "It was a great day and our fluency in Spanish meant that we were able to join in at degree level even though we're only 16," she says. "As a result of my experiences over the last two years, I'm now thinking of a career in interpreting myself."

The young interpreters have a real buzz about them and, unlike many older students of interpreting, manifest fewer apprehensions about getting things wrong and speaking in public. They are aware that the aim of the programme is not to train them as fully-fledged interpreters but to help them acquire a basic awareness of what the job involves, including focusing on meaning rather than words, using memory to good effect, and developing the confidence and reflexes required. They also take part in video analysis of interpreters in action, role-plays and guided discussions on what it takes to be an effective interpreter.

The school is quite clear that its use of the pupils is for basic-level mediation, not to

replace an adult where an adult is deemed necessary in an interpreting situation. Moreover, they are always supported by a member of staff in situations involving parents or adults from outside the school.

Award-winning schemes

The Young Interpreters initiative at Abraham Moss is not the only one of its kind in the country, but it is one of the few at secondary level. Hampshire County Council's Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service (EMTAS) pioneered the idea of using pupils as linguistic mediators for new arrivals some years ago. Its Young Interpreters Scheme, now successfully exported to a number of local authorities and the subject of international interest, has earned extensive recognition, including the Guardian Public Services and Grassroots Excellence Awards (2013). Praise was received from Ofsted, which called the programme an "excellent example of practice that supports and develops children and young people's confidence and leadership skills within schools".

The council's support for dozens of schools in Hampshire includes an interactive virtual platform offering guidance on setting up and running the Young Interpreters Scheme, as well as materials to equip practitioners with the tools to train pupils.

Returning to Abraham Moss, the positive outcomes of the valuable work being done will, hopefully, serve as an incentive to others, not just in Greater Manchester but in northern England generally. Details of its Young Interpreters programme have been presented at various language events, including the Oldham International New Arrivals and EAL Conference for head teachers and school leaders. The school is keen to build a network of schools with similar 'new arrival' needs and encourage them to train up their own teams.

Collins and her colleagues also hope to establish an annual Young Interpreters Conference, based on the Hampshire model, where pupils from different schools would spend a day taking part in fun, language-based activities to "really celebrate the role they play in the life of their schools and communities".

I wish them every success in this exciting venture. Perhaps we will see at least some of the young people involved join the ranks of professional interpreters in years to come.

"Knowing they are doing a valuable job for their school and the community boosts their self-confidence"



DEVELOPING SKILLS

A group of young interpreters at Abraham Moss Community School (main image), and pupils from the school visit Manchester Metropolitan University for training (right)



Playing for the team

Executive Officer Anji Thomas on her wide-ranging role and why she considers herself a 'Jill of all trades'

I joined CIOL in July 2017, and the biggest challenge for me, as Executive Officer, was getting to grips with the work of the organisation. Coming from a membership organisation run by a team of two, it was a big change to work with 24 people spread over the six major functions of CIOL and IoLET (the Educational Trust): Client Services, Live Assessment, Central Services (of which I am part), Marketing and Communications, Development and Production, and Membership. These areas illustrate the varied purpose and role of the Institute in promoting languages and supporting the professional development of members.

My previous experience within the membership sector was working for 11 years for a medical charity supporting women doctors through various stages of their careers. The skills and knowledge I gained there included office, event and financial management, overseeing the membership, awards processes and servicing, and writing minutes. These skills are all required in my current role, which covers a variety of responsibilities, including office management, acting as PA to the Chief Executive, and supporting the various committees.

Being part of the Central Services team means being the first point of contact for trustees who have queries about the committees I service; and for staff members with any issues that arise around the office – from personnel matters to faulty alarm fobs, noisy air-conditioners, blocked sinks and telephone or computer problems.

My role also involves supporting the various teams at their busy times. So it means pulling my sleeves up and helping out with any tasks required, whether it's proofreading, sending out examination papers, preparing delegate packs for events or covering the phones. This has also enabled me to develop a better understanding of the work of each team. Overall, I embrace the variety of my role and see myself as a Jill of all trades.

Correction

In the article 'Journey across Mongolian' (TL57,2), we incorrectly stated that an image was of "a lost Mongolian script". In fact, it was a transliteration into Chinese characters. We would like to apologise to the writer, Enkhtuvshin Namsrai, for this error, which originated in the source caption.

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